

Contact Officer: Helen Kilroy

KIRKLEES COUNCIL

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL

Thursday 19th March 2026

Present: Councillor Itrat Ali (Chair)
Councillor Hannah McKerchar

In attendance: Cllr Viv Kendrick – Cabinet Member, Children's Services
Cllr Jane Rylah – Cabinet Member for Education
Jess Barclay-Lambert – Service Director, Children's
Commissioning, Quality and Health Partnerships
Tom Brailsford – Executive Director, Children and
Families
Joel Hanna - Head of Service for Corporate Parenting
Vicky Metherringham - Family Help, Safeguarding &
Permanence
Jo-Anne Sanders – Service Director, Learning and
Inclusion
Lauren Stephenson – Service Manager, Care Leavers'
Service

Observers: Shahid Ali
Tom Donohoe

Apologies: Councillor Aafaq Butt
Councillor Tanisha Bramwell
Councillor Ashleigh Robinson
Councillor Richard Smith

58 Membership of the Panel

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillor Richard Smith, Councillor Tanisha Bramwell, Councillor Aafaq Butt and Councillor Ashleigh Robinson.

**59 Minutes of the Previous Meeting
RESOLVED –**

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 6th February 2026 be approved as a correct record.

60 Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

61 Admission of the Public

All agenda items were considered in public session.

62 Deputations/Petitions

No deputations or petitions were received.

63 Progress of the Ofsted Improvement Plan

The Panel considered a report on the Progress of the Ofsted Improvement Plan, which was presented by Vicky Metheringham, Service Director for Family Help, Safeguarding and Permanence.

Vicky Metheringham provided an update on the progress made within Children's Social Care since the Ofsted inspection in 2024. The inspection had identified significant improvement, judged Children's Services in Kirklees as being 'good' and acknowledged that leaders had clear action plans in place to address challenges.

Areas of improvement identified by Ofsted during the inspection were -

1. The effectiveness of practice with every child who was experiencing harm from neglect and / or domestic abuse.
2. The quality of written plans, records and meeting minutes for the minority of children in care and care leavers where these documents were weak.
3. The availability and choice of homes for children in care and care leavers.

The Panel were informed that -

- A rigorous improvement plan, overseen by elected members and the Executive Leadership Team, was ensuring that services enhanced opportunities and experiences for families in Kirklees
- Improvement activities related to neglect and domestic abuse had been supported by the Kirklees Safeguarding Partnership.
- Self-evaluation was updated annually and incorporated feedback from practice audits, thematic focus deep dives, and practice learning days.
- Self-evaluation activity had highlighted progress made against a range of areas of practice and identified what further actions were needed.
- Positive progress had been made in all areas identified in the inspection.

Vicky Metheringham advised the Panel that the report provided an overview of the progress made in addressing the areas for improvement and identified where there was more to do. Areas highlighted were -

- Concern remained that domestic abuse continued to be a significant issue and was the primary reason for repeat child protection plans and repeat referrals. A Child Safeguarding Practice Review was supporting multi agency practice after the tragic murder of a parent. A task and finish group had been established to determine how practice could be strengthened where domestic abuse was a driving factor, with the key priority being to address the identified gap in perpetrator focused work
- The improvement of language use in children's records was a priority during 2025. External facilitators had worked alongside all practitioners and significant progress had been made.
- A proactive, targeted approach had been taken to recruit more local foster carers and supported lodgings carers for specific cohorts of children

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- Challenges still existed in finding timely homes for a small minority of looked after children.
- Since the Ofsted inspection in 2024, further improvements had been made and changes embedded for the provision of support for care leavers.

In conclusion, the Panel were informed that -

- The leadership team were clear about priorities and had well established plans to drive progress.
- The workforce was the most stable it had been for the last three years.
- The quality of supervision and consistent management oversight had significantly improved.
- Vacancies would be filled through apprenticeships and student social workers.
- Services and support to care leavers had been transformed and the Kirklees Parenting Board was well embedded. Corporate parenting duties had been enhanced and broadened as care experience had been recognised as a protected characteristic.
- Records which were sensitive and written to children had been a huge success.
- Plans for the Family Help Service had been successful, with a significant service redesign planned during 2026.
- Plans were in place to oversee areas for development in addressing the risks posed by neglect and domestic abuse.
- Sufficiency of homes for children in care remained a key challenge, and an investment in an Edge of Care Service would support this area of practice.

In response to questions the Panel were advised that -

- A range of different training was provided for practitioners around domestic abuse, as part of the domestic abuse action plan.
- Since the inspection, there had been a significant reduction in the number of care leavers accessing temporary accommodation. The length of time they stayed was needs led and there was confidence that the service knew the young people well.
- Social work apprentices from within the service were required to seek approval to attend training from their service manager to ensure that taking part in the course would not negatively impact on services.
- The Edge of Care service would be renamed, and was designed to support families at risk of breaking down, reducing the number of 11-15 year-olds in care.
- The quality of practice was assured through regular monitoring, via learning conversations, feedback from young people and families, practice learning days, weekly performance reports, and access to a Tableau dashboard. There was a gap in data identified around the 89, 21-25 year old care leavers who were supported by the service, and this was being worked on.

RESOLVED –

- 1) That the report be noted and officers thanks for their contributions.

- 2) That officers and staff be thanked for their efforts in improving the service, which the Panel had seen evidence of in their visits throughout the year, especially with regard to accommodation, education and employment.
- 3) That congratulations be passed on to all staff involved in the Social Care Conference, and in the work undertaken to put children at the centre of their written records.

64 The Re-design of the Leaving Care Service

The Panel considered a report on the Re-design of the Leaving Care Service, which was presented by Joel Hanna, Head of Service for Corporate Parenting.

Joel Hanna highlighted the following key points -

- The report set out the journey of the improvements made since November 2023, when the national government adviser on care leaver services, Mark Bradell, visited Kirklees to provide a benchmark of services in comparison with other services nationally.
- There had been a clear focus on the strategy and resources needed, and the structure required to underpin the planned improvements.
- The Kirklees Parenting Board had been redesigned from the previous Corporate Parenting Board, and had set out six priorities.
- One of the priorities was to develop a care leaving partnership to support care leavers going forward.
- Ambassador events had been held with partners including Kirklees College, Huddersfield University, small charities and community services, to help design the priorities, the structure and the board arrangements.
- Two hubs, Number 11 in Huddersfield and Number 12 in Dewsbury, offered a welcoming environment for care leavers with kitchen, shower and laundry facilities.
- Partners used the hubs as a marketplace to offer their services.
- In July 2024 the report signalled that the improvements had already started to show a real benefit, but more time was needed to show sustainability, which accounted for the disparity between the report and the judgment.
- A service review was carried out to build on the improvement. Additional funding was applied for to engage with care leavers, and the number of 21 to 25 year olds who engaged with the service had increased. This allowed care leavers to make better use of the wider partnership and achieve success in education and accommodation, the two main challenges for care experienced adults.
- Case loads were significant, but would be reduced by the appointment of new staff.
- Scrutiny Panel Members had recently visited Number 11 and seen how the hub hosted specialist services.

RESOLVED –

- 1) That the report be noted and officers thanked for their contributions.
- 2) The Panel agreed that following their visit to Number 11 they had found it to be a safe space for care leavers, where engagement with other partners could start on a positive footing.

- 3) The Panel noted the optimism within the team about the additional funding and extra capacity, that would enable the fulfilment of the plans.

65 Verbal Update on the SEND White Paper: Every Child Achieving and Thriving

The Panel considered a verbal update on the SEND White Paper: Every Child Achieving and Thriving, which was presented by Tom Brailsford, Director for Children and Families.

Tom Brailsford highlighted the following key points -

- The comprehensive SEND White Paper had been published after delays, and formed part of the wider schools White Paper.
- Events had been organised locally to consult with a range of professionals, parents and partners about the proposed reforms, and this SEND White Paper consultation closed in mid-May.
- Responses would be sent to the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department for Health and Social Care.
- The government had tasked Directors of Children's Services with writing a reform plan, to be signed off by mid-June.
- National consultation had taken place with parents about the approach, which moved towards supporting mainstream inclusion for young people within their local areas and communities.
- The White Paper suggested three levels of support: targeted support, targeted plus within a unit in mainstream schools, and support in special schools where children had a complex Education, Health and Social Care Plan (EHCP).
- Every secondary school would be expected to have a unit/additionally resourced provision (ARP).
- The White Paper acknowledged that schools would need extra support to undertake this approach and the government proposed a 1.8 million fund called "Experts at Hand".
- There could be challenges around the workforce due to pressures across the board and there were changes within the Integrated Care Board (ICB).
- The local authority would be the 'convenor' for the system and would hold responsibility for the co-ordination of the changes.
- If the municipal year allowed, the reform plan would be brought back to Children's Scrutiny Panel, if not, this would be done post-submission.

In answer to questions from the Panel, Tom Brailsford advised that -

- The reform plan would be shared with the Panel for their input.
- Two events, in North and South Kirklees, would take place to invite parents and multi-agency partners for feedback on the White Paper and establish ongoing consultation and inclusion with partners. The Chair confirmed that they would attend one of the engagement events.
- Schools in Kirklees were positive about inclusion, and it was possible that they may have further questions around capital funding, wraparound support, the curriculum, and the focus of the inspection regime.
- Prior to the White Paper, the DfE had held webinars primarily directed at parents during the evening.

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- The Our Voice Team had carried out direct engagement to find out the views of children and young people.

RESOLVED –

- 1) That the update on the SEND White Paper: Every Child Achieving and Thriving, be noted and officers thanked for their contributions.
- 2) That the SEND Reforms Plan be considered by the Panel early in the 2026-27 municipal year.
- 3) That the Panel would attend the SEND Reforms Event on the 25th March 2026 and report back on their findings to the Panel.

66

Performance Data (Children's Services) - verbal update on highlights

Vicky Metheringham, Service Director for Family help, Safeguarding and Permanence, gave an update on performance data to 31st January 2026 -

- Initial child protection conferences – there had been a decline in performance in the timeliness of initial child protection conferences in January 2026. The main reason for the decline was a delay in invitation lists being sent to partners and family. This left insufficient time to schedule the conference given that partner agencies needed time to provide the required information. Solutions to improve the situation included reinstating oversight from the service manager and head of service, and meeting with managers to review the workflow and agreeing practical improvements. The timeliness of section 47 investigations were reviewed twice a week resulting in a notable improvement since January 2026. Where delays had occurred, social workers continued to see those children and clear safety plans were put in place with partners to ensure the delay did not expose the children to unnecessary risk.
- Child protection visits – there had been a reduction in child protection visits according to the data, however weekly performance reports from team managers explained the children were seen, but that there was an issue with recording in a timely way on the electronic social care record. Proactive steps had been taken to address the issue. When children were not seen, this was mainly due to the family not being in at the time that the practitioner made the visit.
- Child protection review conferences – there had been an apparent decrease in the timeliness of child protection review conferences. This was because a small number of child protection reviews had been rescheduled and therefore convened outside statutory time scales. Reasons for rescheduling were mixed, but included ensuring that parents and partners could attend. In two instances the report from the social worker had not been available due to Christmas leave, and the importance of ensuring the reports were ready was recognised. The overall 12-month average of review conferences which had taken place on time, was 91%, which was above the national average picture.

In answer to a question, the Panel were advised that the planned approach was to create a dedicated multi-agency child protection team that would redefine roles and responsibilities. This would bring greater consistency and oversight of decision making, and allow for more reflection during decision-making conversations. The

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most experienced social work practitioners would lead the child protection decision making.

Jo-Anne Sanders, Service Director for Learning and Inclusion, gave an update on the January 2026 exclusion and suspensions performance data and highlighted key points which included -

- 13 notifications of permanent exclusions had been made, of which 4 children were at SEN support, 2 had an EHCP and one was a child looked after. In terms of answering a question on whether exclusions were proportionate, the following assurance was given:
- When a permanent exclusion notification was received for a young person receiving SEND support, the learning and inclusion team would already have reviewed the evidence behind the notification and been assured that the decision-making processes followed were in line with statutory guidance.
- Schools were required to provide detail of reasonable adjustments and interventions implemented, and the involvement of external professionals and the risk factors involved.
- The inclusion team had also explored with schools whether alternatives to exclusion could be considered.
- Governing bodies were required to review every permanent exclusion through a governor disciplinary committee meeting where written and verbal representations were considered, to determine whether the exclusion would be upheld or whether the leadership was directed to reinstate the pupil.
- The LA worked with schools to engage with the inclusion team where youngsters received more than one suspension, to provide earlier support from the outreach team, alternative provision or time at a different school.
- For children and young people who were looked after, the inclusion team worked closely with the virtual school.
- Fortnightly monitoring for exclusions and suspensions took place.
- Suspensions were significantly lower than at a similar period last year.

In answer to a question regarding the training of school governors, Jo-Anne Sanders advised the Panel that school governor training was commissioned.

Jo-Anne Sanders gave an update on January's performance data on EHCPs and highlighted key points which included -

- In January, 5,144 EHCPs were maintained by Kirklees, with 68 EHCPs issued and 81 new requests received.
- Statutory compliance of issuing EHCPs in January was low, at 2.9%, due to challenges across the partnership and the spike in applications during June and July 2025.
- Plans were being issued at 21 or 22 weeks, just outside time scales.
- Systems were in place with the liquid logic portal and it was possible to pinpoint the stage of each plan and identify hold-ups.
- In response to the Scrutiny Panel request for data around complaints, mediations, and tribunals, quarterly data and analysis would be provided at future meetings.

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- In January 2026, 23 complaints had been made - 12 of those were at stage one, one of was at stage two. 7 complaints had been received from MPs and Councillor Enquiries and 3 subject access requests had been submitted.
- No Ombudsman enquiries had been registered and no complaints were at stage three.
- Where concerns were raised, more were being resolved at the first stage.
- The biggest driver for complaints was around placement and provision, which was a nationwide issue.
- In response, time and energy had been invested into early resolution, with casework officers trying to keep communication channels open with families.
- There had been an increase in requests for tribunals, due to system pressure and placement related appeals. Decision making undertaken across panels was broadly robust and most decisions were upheld.
- There had been investment in staff training and capacity within the mediation and tribunal teams to manage complexity and timeliness.
- Learning from mediation and tribunals was being used to inform service improvement.

RESOLVED –

- 1) That the verbal updates be noted and officers be thanked for the level of detail provided.
- 2) That the data on complaints, tribunals and mediations be included in the data booklet for consideration by the Panel at future meetings.

67 Pre-decision scrutiny - Cabinet decisions on the horizon

No items of pre-decision scrutiny on Cabinet decisions were discussed.

68 Feedback from Panel Members on issues considered by Kirklees Parenting Board

Councillor Viv Kendrick, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, updated the Panel on key highlights from the meeting of the Kirklees Parenting Board held on March 10th 2026 -

- Work was ongoing on reciprocal arrangements for care leavers across Yorkshire and the Humber, so that care leavers living across borders would be able to access benefits such as free transport.
- Discussions with Kirklees Active Leisure were ongoing, to ensure the offer better suited the needs of care leavers, in response to their feedback.
- Some care leaver Board Members who had contributed very well to the Board would be leaving as they were no longer of care leaver age; new members would be joining.
- Robust discussion was had about Priority Six, Developing our Care Leavers Partnership to Deliver Success for Life.

The Panel agreed to receive future copies of the minutes of Kirklees Parenting Board as issues raised could trigger an area for future scrutiny focus or prompt questions, and Cllr Kendrick suggested that it was a direct way to hear young people's voices.

RESOLVED –

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That the Panel would receive future copies of the minutes of Kirklees Parenting Board.

69

Work Programme and Agenda Plan for 2025/26

The Panel noted the end of the Work Programme for 2025/26 that significant progress had been made during this municipal year, and that some visits were scheduled to take place in the next municipal year 2026/27.

RESOLVED -

That the progress on the Work Programme and Agenda Plan for 2025/26 be noted.